

Citation for published version:

Murakami, K 2010, 'Liminality in language use: some thoughts on interactional analysis from a dialogical perspective', *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 30-38.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-010-9115-x>

DOI:

[10.1007/s12124-010-9115-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-010-9115-x)

Publication date:

2010

[Link to publication](#)

The original publication is available at springerlink.com

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Commentary

Grossen, M. (2009) "Interaction Analysis and Psychology: A Dialogical Perspective"

Liminality in language use: some thoughts on interactional analysis from a dialogical perspective

Kyoko Murakami
University of Bath, United Kingdom
k.murakami@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

This essay traces my engagement with Michèle Grossen's ideas of a dialogical perspective on interaction analysis (Grossen 2009) and highlights a process account of self in interaction. Firstly I draw on Turner's concept of liminality with respect to the transformative, temporal significance in interaction. Secondly I explored further the conversation analytic concepts such as formulation and reformulation as a viable analytical tool for a dialogical perspective. Lastly, I addressed the issue of interaction in institutional settings, in particular with interactional asymmetries of interaction, whilst relativising the I-position dialogical perspective. I explore insights from social anthropology as well as revisiting conversation analysis and discursive psychology, concluding that a promising direction would be sought through a cross-fertilisation between dialogism and other sibling perspectives concerning language use, communication, social action and discourse- and narrative-based analyses.

Keywords

Interaction analysis; liminality, dialogical perspective

Introduction

Over several decades since the discursive turn (Harré 2003), interaction (or interactional) analysis has gained prominence among those who take qualitative approaches to research in psychology and other social scientific disciplines. Interaction, like many other terms such as discourse, dialogue, and narrative, takes its diverse definitions depending on the assumptions that the researcher holds. Michèle Grossen's (2009) article clarifies some key issues on interaction analysis and introduces a distinctive use by the community of scholars and researchers who are bound by the dialogical perspective. Her treatment of interaction analysis is a timely extension of Per Linell's grandiose summation of dialogism (Linell 2009). Taking on the ambitious task of teasing out the muddled-up interpretations and analytical applications of interaction analysis, she painstakingly and meticulously maps out key philosophical and theoretical traditions that use interaction as an empirical tool to understand psychological phenomena including discursive construction of self and identities. The first part of the paper puts us in touch with some unique and distant historical roots indicating that the notion of interaction was explored before our time. The latter part identifies empirical challenges and dilemmas of the dialogical researcher undertaking interaction analysis.

This essay traces my engagement and journey with Grossen's ideas and assertions of a dialogical perspective on interaction analysis, taking a particular interest in analysing the self, not as a static being but 'becoming', a process account of self in interaction. This trend is also evident in the studies of identities. The current constructivist stance on the concept 'identities' informs us of it as being "constructed, fluid, and multiple", but Brubaker and Cooper caution that it "leaves us without a rationale for talking about 'identities' at all...and has lost its analytical purchase" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 1). The essay reveals my interim thoughts on interaction analysis from a dialogical perspective with an emphasis on intersubjectivity as a transformative ritual process, in which formulation and reformulation and institutional asymmetries are empirically observed in interaction. These three points are not the exhaustive list of thinking points, derived from her argument, but rather are raised as a way for expanding our scope for understanding and undertaking interaction analysis, whether it is from a dialogical or from other sibling perspectives.

Dynamic sense of self as becoming: A process account of self in interaction

As "an integral part of the history of psychology" (Grossen 2010, p. 1), the notion of interaction is found in the work by Piaget, Vygotsky, Kurt Lewin and G. H. Mead, who provide the rich foundations of and the intellectual roots in sociocultural and cultural-historical theory. Along with those social constructivist thinkers, interaction is pivotal to social constructionist and other sociological tradition focused on studies of social action and order of interaction – examples by Berger and Luckman and Gergen, and Goffman respectively, to name just a few. Underpinned by these intellectual traditional and theoretical strands, dialogism is aimed at developing a dynamic account for the organisation and functioning of the self. Much of the psychologist's effort into 'finding' self or a sense of who they are as identity has been found within a burgeoning interest in language use, talk-in-interaction and communicative practice in therapeutic and counselling encounters. Perhaps Rom Harré's remark in his keynote speech better describes the new mode, "Psychology finally found language as fish found its water" (Harré 2009). For me, to approach interaction and undertake interaction analysis, the focus on language use is crucial.

As a critique against the positivistic, factorial conception of interaction, Grossen echoes much of the critical psychologist's criticism on mainstream psychology with the way it established its methodological orthodoxy, the empirical enterprise verging on "the single-minded, embodied individual person as the basic, enduring, integrally-organized reality to be studied" (Grossen 2009, p. 3). A dialogical conception of interaction stresses its principal importance of language use, including meaning-making and interdependence of factors--social relations, physical environment, context, and tool mediation and artefacts. The dialogical conception of interaction analysis includes four areas of phenomena of language-use: (1) the construction of meaning, (2) multivoicedness and heteroglossia, (3) the context as a construction, (4) tools as a non-human agency and evaluates the

potential for each area as an analytical tool and addresses its methodological implications. The aim of this articulation is to “ask whether it is possible to develop analytical tools that are coherent with dialogical assumptions” (Grossen 2009, p. 7).

Intersubjectivity in interaction

A well-rehearsed criticism against any kind of dualism is a popular strategy nowadays against mainstream psychology's ill-treatment of relationships between the subject and the object, the individual and the environment, and mind and physical phenomena. Grossen argues that they should be considered inseparable, inter-twined and inter-dependent. The dialogical perspective is anti-essentialist and accepts the process ontology in studying the individual (or the group) with a context/environment as a part-whole relation.

In respect to the idea of “the research object”, a dialogical perspective does not focus on the individual as a unit of analysis. Taking the anti-essentialist stance, the dialogical perspective looks at interaction beyond the confinement of the individual - not the participants' inner mental world, but, instead, as an intersubjective process with socially organised and negotiated meaning making. There seems to be an assumption of interaction in which intersubjectivity and shared understanding can be empirically observed as a research object. Intersubjectivity, according to Rommetveit (1998), is argued that the perceptions of the two interacting parties would never exactly match. Meaning making is a phenomenon outside the individual and arguably within interaction. How then can we account for dynamic and fluid discursive moves and oscillation of meanings observed in interaction? Elsewhere, I have argued that variability of accounts and positions produced in talk in interaction is studiable as a psychological phenomena (such as reconciliation) using discursive psychological approach (see for example, Murakami 2007), but I wish to seek something different here.

Let us step aside from psychology and those aforementioned traditions, and instead pay a renewed attention to the social anthropologist Victor Turner. The concept of liminality (Turner 1995(1969)) might be used to deepen our understanding of the emergent, in-between and temporal nature of intersubjectivity in interaction. Liminality is one of the guiding concepts which Turner used in ethnographic work on rituals in African cultures. With its Latin origin of crossing a ‘threshold’, liminality was coined by van Arnold van Gennep (van Gennep 2004/1960), who called the “liminal phase” a *rites de passage* (“rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” van Gennep’s definition in Turner, p. 94). Turner’s elaboration on liminality was remarkably insightful as to what is at issue:

Ritual and ceremony can be looked upon as spatially and temporarily arranged actions, involving several participants acting in concert, and employ objects. Rituals are semiotic wholes, and it may be possible to produce grammars (rules of communication) that describe them. (Turner, 1995/1969, p. 94)

Here one may be tempted to ignore the immediate relevance of this passage due to its focus on rituals and ceremony. However, from the perspective of sociology of action and social order (including ethnomethodologists and conversational analysts, whose main research object is interaction) one would see the symbolic resemblance of conversation or interaction as rituals in which mundane, everyday conversations are communicative practice orienting to social and moral order of the dyad and face-to-face encounter. Interaction can be seen as a symbolic ritual of conversation. It is a socially organised practice of communication, in which participants with (putatively) shared goals and interests follow putative rules and social and moral order at a given moment in time. In fact, therapeutic practice would qualify this description, as it is a socially organised interaction, with ritual-like institutionally defined procedures and protocols. Communication or interaction, which takes place in therapy sessions, may be deemed to be symbolically performed rituals and ceremonies, which are aimed at the development and/or the transformation of the patient/client. The transformation demands more than what the patient may say at a particular point. Turner explains how liminality works in ritual and ceremony in terms of transition:

"Van Gennep has shown that all rites of passage or "transition" are marked by three phases: separation, margin..., and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions...or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structure" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (Turner 1995/1969, pp. 94-5)

The concept of liminality is based on the process ontology and embraces the part-whole relationship in selfhood in the course of transition without having to lose one or the other. This developmental, time-honoured concept of liminality is akin to how interaction is initiated, kept ongoing and is ended between the interlocutors. In conversation, whether face-to-face or distant, real or virtual, verbal or written interaction, two parties meet at a place and time to communicate. Therefore interaction is a process-oriented concept, implying a temporal dimension of psychological phenomena. How does the dialogical perspective take account of the temporal nature of the phenomenon of human interaction? What concept of time and scale does it rely on? Is it possible to come up with time as a unit of analysis? These questions might offer some pointers for the dialogical perspective to strengthen the links between interaction and intersubjectivity.

Reinstate Formulation?

In discussing co-construction of meaning as a distinctive feature of a dialogical perspective of interaction, Grossen uses a piece of conversational data with the focus on formulation and reformulation as an analytical tool. The analysis illustrates how problems were topicalised and transformed by the therapist and the client throughout a therapy session. Although formulation is a widely used analytic concept and has its analytic currency, Grossen seems unfairly dismissive. How the issue “the problem” (or what she calls the source) is formulated and reformulated should be maintained as our main analytical focus. A conversation-analytic view representing those who study talk-in-interaction, would disagree with her. Formulation-reformulation is a powerful analytical concept in understanding language use. For instance, Heritage (Heritage 1985) describes the practice of formulating as:

Summarising, glossing, or developing the gist of an informant’s earlier statements. Although it is relatively rare in conversation, it is common in institutionalised audience-directed interaction [where it] is most commonly undertaken by questioners. (1985, p. 100)

Despite the generic function of formulation as a summarising role, it may refer to moves in which the interviewer seeks somehow to evaluate the interviewee’s remarks (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998). Here, reading the extract as an outsider of this research and having a limited understanding of the interaction this excerpt was taken from Grossen (2009), the formulation-reformulation sequence seems to manage the practical interactional business of, by borrowing Heritage’s summation again,

[R]estating the client’s position by making overt reference to what might be treated as implied... and the client is invited to agree to a characterisation of his position that overtly portrays him as critical of, or in conflict with, some third party. (Heritage, 1985, p. 110)

The analytic focus on formulation-reformulation reveals a subtle interactional, a negotiation of what the problem is and how it can be agreed by those two interlocutors. Putting it another way, it traces the process of how intersubjectivity is achieved in the interaction.

Within any formulation, although being uttered by the speaker, the addressivity of the formulation makes it so that it is not strictly of the individual production; it is attended to how it is heard by the present and non-present other in a given situation. For Grossen, ‘the turn’ as a unit of analysis does not provide a viable way forward in terms of developing a method in line with a dialogical stance. Implied here may be a criticism against those scholars (e.g., ethnomethodologists, conversation analysts and “some” discursive psychologists) who equally take interaction analysis seriously and look at interaction through a microscopic lens, applying fine-grain analysis focused on a sequence of turn-taking. The organisation of turn-taking would enable us to see ways in which interlocutors co-construct meaning and shared

understanding of the context and its social rules which are embedded. Furthermore, the formulation-reformulation can be considered as a process of establishing intersubjectivity, where multivoicedness and heteroglossia are observed within professional and institutional discourses. I shall elaborate on this in the next section.

Multivoicedness

The Bakhtinian concept of multivoicedness and heteroglossia is a major concern for those researchers who study professional and institutional discourse in understanding how practitioners in institutions talk from a particular position and carry out continuity/historicity in practice (as well as discontinuity and change for their practice). Here, acknowledging the importance of studying the institutional position in which the practitioner inhabits, Grossen focuses on the issue of “who speaks?” In interaction, this idea of the speaker is far more complex, as she emphasises, suggesting that subjectivity is not singular but rather, incorporates multiple positions. The speaker can use the words of others to distance him/herself, to avoid taking responsibility as an accountable action. Interaction analysis, of which some forms of discourse analysis are a part, has developed a concept of accountability and legitimisation (Buttny 1993).

Importantly, these reference points presented in the paper are somewhat skewed toward the pragmatic and linguistic conventions of Indo-European languages and tend to ignore, for instance, languages that have far more complicated pronoun systems (See Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) and also Rumsey (2000) for an enthralling debate on this matter in social anthropology). Also, the reference points tend to overlook various linguistic devices of marking social relations, including race, class, gender age categories, ranks and hierarchies, which are evident in discourses of institutional life. This means that the notion of interaction is not confined to “face-to-face” interaction; a seemingly mundane interaction between two persons implies more than the here-and-now (time and space), but could also refer to aspects of discourse which would enable the persons to transcend time and space (for an example of analysis using positioning theory see (Murakami 2007). What Grossen draws as methodological implications in terms of multivoicedness and heteroglossia, stresses a pressing need for refining the analytical tool for finesse, with which the research tool would account for the subject’s dilemma, contradictions and dialogues with distant and past discourses (transcending here-and-now) and dialogues with oneself (inner speech) – the way in which private language is developed through internalisation and externalisation of sign and symbols including language and discourses around and in the person (Lawrence and Valsiner 2003). These features of multivoicedness and heteroglossia pose immediate challenges for the interaction analyst, who tends to look at face-to-face interaction as a snapshot, without considering how the topic relevance is established, not just locally, but also when multiple voices are drawn from a wider context.

Grossen uses the analytic concept “voice” and presents an analysis by attempting to identify whose voice the subject is speaking from (Grossen, p. 12). For me, interaction analysis does not end with identifying whose voice

one is speaking from (i.e., merely looking at who is saying what). I am less eager to adhere to the analytic convention, in which the major upshot is to identify voices, whether singular or multiple - consequently revealing a variety of voices in accordance with Bakhtin's concept of dialogue. Whilst Grossen (p. 13) places monologism against dialogism in one spectrum, I am inclined to argue that monologism is socially constructed just as dialogism is – both are essentially a dialogical phenomenon. What seems to be a one/singular voice or voice in unison in discourse is not naturally so by default, but it is constituted as monological, repressing the voices of others and counter-positions. Hence, the dichotomy of monoperspectivity and multiperspectivity is not sustainable. Following this view, what is canonised and monological, i.e. is closed in any given singular moment or situation, such as scientific discourse (Mulkay 1979), can be reopened and challenged for further argumentation and debate which may bring about controversy and a contestation of views and opinions.

Interactional asymmetries in institutional settings

In contrast to the symmetrical relationships between speakers in ordinary conversation, institutional interactions are characteristically asymmetrical (Drew and Heritage 1992). By symmetrical, equal participation between speakers is observed in ordinary conversation. In contrast, when analysing talk-in-interaction in institutional settings (like Grossen's example), we can appreciate a significant difference in institutional talk that reveals the social-structural relations of the institution and of the actors which inhabit it. However, this distinction needs to be taken with caution and cannot be used as a general rule for analysing interaction, with a view that:

[A]ll social interaction must inevitably be asymmetric on a moment-to-moment basis and many interactions are likely to embody substantial asymmetry when moment-to-moment participation is aggregated over the course of an encounter. (Drew and Heritage, p. 48)

In many institutional forms of discourse (like therapy session), there is a direct relationship between status and role, on the one hand, and discursive rights and obligations, on the other (p. 49). Following my earlier point about formulation-reformulation in interaction, it is possible to suggest that interaction analysis on the specific issue of formulations-reformulation could be manifested in interactional asymmetries – the way in which institutional actors (the therapist in this case) may strategically direct the talk through such means as their capacity to change topics and their selective formations, or reformulations in this case, formulation-reformulation.

Concluding remarks

In this commentary, I tried to build on Grossen's discussion on three grounds; firstly, by using Turner's concept of liminality with respect to the transformative, temporal significance in interaction. Secondly I explored further the conversation analytic concepts such as formulation and reformulation as a viable analytical tool for a dialogical perspective. Lastly, I addressed the issue of interaction in institutional settings, in particular with interactional asymmetries of interaction, where the monologic perspective

may seem dominant and prevalent. I also considered social anthropological studies self and multiple I-positions to relativise the I-position dialogical perspective. Following the organisation of formulation-reformulation, one may come to better understand interactional asymmetries as to how multivoiced human interaction is manifested as the monologic perspective (or voice) in a given institutional practice. I ventured out from the familiar ground and explored insights from other disciplines or perspectives – namely, social anthropology as well as revisiting conversation analysis and discursive psychology, some of which Grossen also duly acknowledges. None of these points were intended as a disagreement to her argument or the assumptions that the dialogical perspective holds. I hope I make clear that my commentary shares a number of the dialogical assumptions and the approach to analysing interaction. I am hopeful that there will be further scholarly collaborations to follow in the future – for instance, for refining interaction analysis according to the dialogical perspective. Possible source for such refinement might be in the way that meaning construction is analysed, without being preoccupied with what is said by whom, within interaction data. A natural next step may be to consider microgenesis and microgenetic analysis (Wagoner 2008; Diriwächter 2009) in extending the discussion on interaction analysis. A worthwhile, but possibly more ambitious effort could be geared towards encouraging cross-fertilisation of dialogism and other sibling perspectives concerned with language use, communication, social action and discourse and narrative based analyses.

References

- Brubaker, R. and F. Cooper (2000). "Beyond identity." Theory and society **29**: 1-47.
- Buttny, R. (1993). Social accountability in communication. London, Sage.
- Diriwächter, R. (2009). Idiographic microgenesis: re-visiting the experimental tradition of Aktualgenese. Dynamic process methodology in the social and developmental sciences. J. Valsiner, P. Molenaar, N. Chaudhary and M. Lyra. New York, Springer: 319-352.
- Drew, P. and J. Heritage, Eds. (1992). Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Grossen, M. (2009). "Interaction Analysis and Psychology: A Dialogical Perspective " Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science: 1-22.
- Harré, R. (2003). The Discursive Turn in Social Psychology. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis. D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen and H. E. Hamilton. Oxford, Blackwell: 688-706.
- Harré, R. (2009). Language and psychology for the third millennium (Keynote Speech). 10th Inter-University Graduate Conference: Culture, Cognition & Construction (22-23 May). London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Heritage, J. (1985). Analyzing news interviews: aspects of the production of talk for an "overhearing" audience. Handbook of Discourse Analysis, vol. III: Discourse and Dialogue. T. van Dijk. London, Academic Press. **III**: 95-119.
- Hutchby, I. and R. Wooffitt (1998). Conversation Analysis: Principles, practices and applications. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Lawrence, J. A. and J. Valsiner (2003). "Making Personal Sense: An Account of Basic Internalization and Externalization Processes." Theory & Psychology **13**(6): 723-752.
- Linell, P. (2009). Rethinking language, mind, and world dialogically: Interactional and contextual theories of human sense-making. Charlotte, NC, USA, Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Mühlhäusler, P. and R. Harré (1990). Pronouns and people: The linguistic construction of social and personal identity. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Mulkay, M. (1979). Science and the sociology of knowledge. London, George Allen & Unwin.
- Murakami, K. (2007). "Positioning in Accounting for Redemption and Reconciliation." Culture & Psychology **13**(4): 431-452.
- Rommetveit, R. (1998). Intersubjective attunement and linguistically mediated meaning in discourse.

- Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny. S. Bråten. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 354--371.
- Rumsey, A. (2000). "Agency, personhood and the 'I' of discourse in the Pacific and beyond." The journal of the royal anthropological institute **6**(1): 101-115.
- Turner, V. W. (1995(1969)). The ritual process: structure and anti-structure. New York, Aldine de Gruyter.
- van Gennep, A. (2004/1960). The Rites of Passage (Les rites de passage: étude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil). London, Routledge.
- Wagoner, B. (2008). "Narrative form and content of remembering." Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science **42**(3): 315-323.